

# First ladies belong to a nation

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The assemblage of local, state and national dignitaries was impressive when Bess Truman was buried Oct. 21 next to her husband in the

courtyard of the Truman Library in Independence.

But one of the most striking sights to me that day was the gathering of three women, each dressed in elegant mourning black: the current first lady, Nancy Reagan, and two former first ladies, Ro-

salynn Carter and Betty Ford. After the church service, they joined mourners at the gravesite and sat on folding chairs on the north side of the graves.

It was difficult that day—from my vantage point through a nearby library window—not to stare at this sad portrait of three famous women. In an essay for *The Times* the next morning I wrote this:

"They were among the first ones to arrive for the interment ceremony, and it was hard to look at them—dressed in black, funereal smiles on—without wondering what they were thinking just then about their own mortality, about their own womanhood, about the incredible source of strength and inspiration Bess Truman has been to them and to anyone who has carried the burdens of White House life.

"But maybe they simply thought of the magnificent love that Harry and Bess had for each other—a love that was at once both fantastically romantic and deeply rooted, a love to cheer about, to marvel at."

It was impossible that day for me to approach the first ladies and ask them what, indeed, they had been thinking about as they sat in that place of history. But later I wrote them a brief note, asking each to express what had gone through her mind as she watched one of her predecessors being buried.

After more than a month, no response of any kind has been received from Mrs. Ford. Mrs. Reagan's press secretary, Sheila Tate, wrote this to explain why the current first lady has decided not to re-

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"Out of respect for the family and in keeping with the dignity of that occasion, Mrs. Reagan does not feel it would be appropriate at this time."

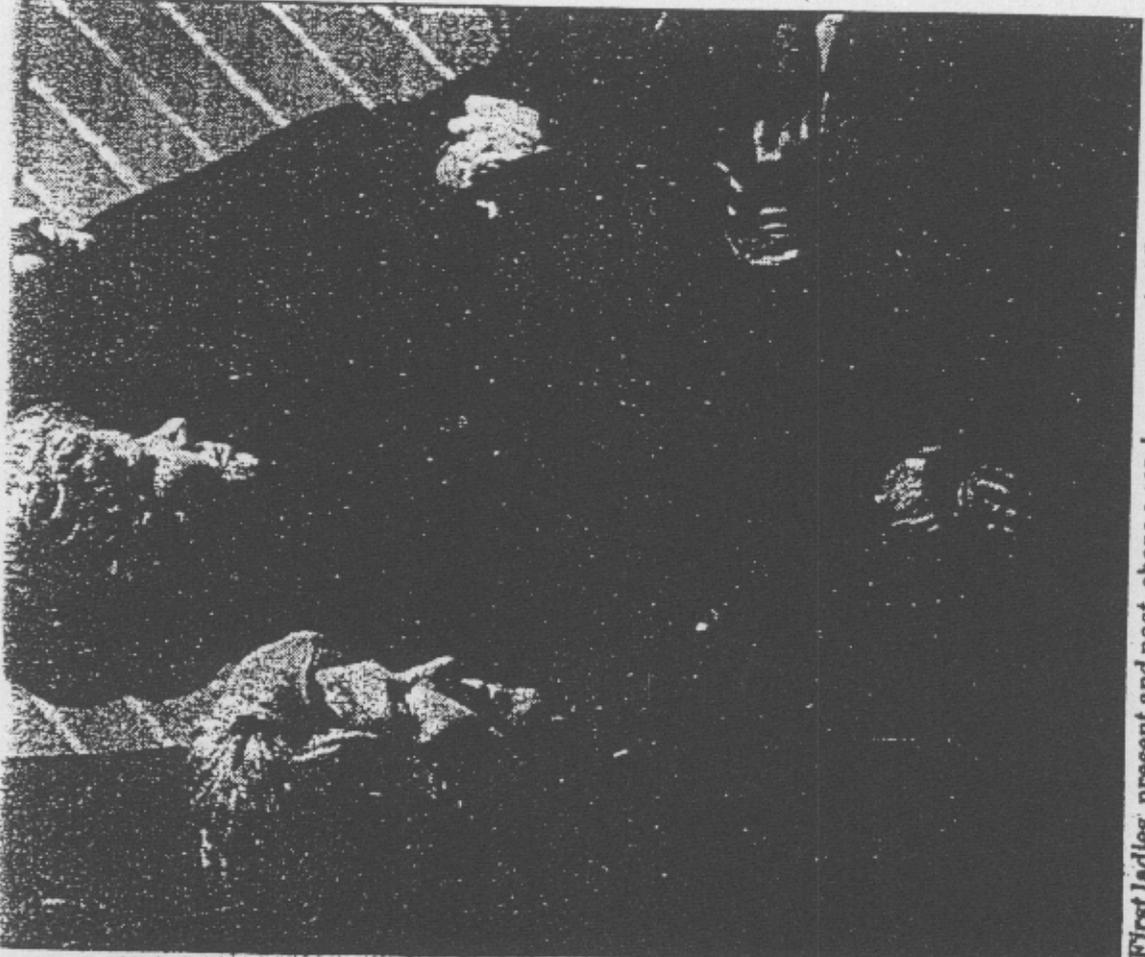
But Mrs. Carter's personal assistant, Madeline MacBean, wrote to say that the wife of the 39th president "is happy to share with you some of her thoughts on that occasion."

And enclosed in the envelope from the office that Mrs. Carter shares with Jimmy Carter in Atlanta was a thoughtful, one-page reply.

Here it is in full:  
"Bess Truman had the kind of long and full life that all of us hope will be our own legacy."

"After funeral gave me a special chance to reflect on her life and its contribution to our country, and to pay my personal

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First ladies, present and past, share a somber moment at Bess Truman's funeral. (staff photo by Chuck Kneyse.)

